
A Review of Indigenous Maya Resistance in Colonial Yucatan

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"My name is Giselle Adams and I'm a recent graduate of CSUDH with a degree in Anthropology with a focus in Biological Anthropology. My interests combine human osteology, history, and BIPOC rights and social justice. I believe it is vital to learn from our ancestors and decolonize the framework around Eurocentric ideologies within the pedagogies of education."

In *Writing as a Resistance*, John F. Chuchiak argues that the writings of colonial Maya priests were an effective resistance against their Spanish colonizers. Spanish Missionaries set up throughout the Yucatan peninsula were strategically designed to convert the Maya to Christianity while also teaching Maya scribes the “formal” ways of writing with the use of the Latin alphabet. Chuchiak asserts that elite Maya nobility taught themselves how to blend both their native hieroglyphs and the Latin alphabet into various documents in record keeping and personal writings.

The *Maya Formulary* was a system created by these Maya elites which used their system of graphic pluralism along with the alphabetic writing that was enforced by the Franciscan friars. In 1547, at a Franciscan mission established in Merida, Fray Luis de Villalpando “was the first friar to study the Maya language and to apply it to the Latin system of grammar” (Chuchiak 2010, 89). Chuchiak emphasizes that, historically, this was the first initiative by the Spanish to understand the Mayan language system. In addition to Villalpando, his companion, Fray Juan de Herrera, taught the

first school for noble sons of Maya elite, and with this, “Villalpando and Herrera adapted the Latin alphabet to the Mayan language so that the Maya could write their language using the Latin script” (Chuchiak 2010, 89). This was in direct contrast to another Spanish friar, Friar Diego de Landa, who tried unsuccessfully to create a Maya alphabet. De Landa believed that Maya hieroglyphs were letters that could be transcribed using the Latin alphabet but did not use six Latin letters (D, F, G, Q, R, S) and understood this to be a varied understanding of their writing (Chuchiak 2010, 89). Naïve to what these hieroglyphs meant; the friars believed that these writings were nothing more than historical references. Chuchiak states that the survival of early Maya hieroglyphic scripts were kept in the hands of Maya priests. One notable priest was named Chilán Couoh (chilan meaning prophet in Maya). Chilán Couoh advocated that the language of the Spanish and their alphabet was inferior to that of their ancient Maya writing system. Beginning in 1567, Chilán Couoh began to collect their Maya codices in order to preserve their culture and accumulated a rich ancient library of manuscripts containing lineages, history, astronomy, and rituals. In 1569, the Spanish, led by Juan Garçon, found a temple containing Maya idols and an expansive library of Maya hieroglyphic books and codices, only to destroy the temple and all it contained. Prior to the 1569 destruction, these Spanish friars were openly interested in the Maya system of hieroglyphics.

Spanish interpretation of Maya writing was the initiative to create a school that taught “Latin and Mayan” grammar to noble children. The missions responsible for this initiative are also responsible for the downfall of their own efforts to regulate Maya culture. Future scribes or *escribanos* were able to incorporate Maya style writing within Spanish documents using coding and riddles that were only able to be deciphered by other *escribanos*. The advantage of multilingualism in conjunction with the use of a dual writing system was naturally kept within the bounds of nobility and Maya elite. The systematic use of keeping this knowledge within noble families was beneficial. Pre-Hispanic elite clans were able to use their family ties and education to circulate the use of their “Maya formulary” as their position as *ah dzib*, the Maya equivalent to Spanish *escribanos*. Chuchiak argues that the resistance to colonialism and the preservation of Maya history and culture is in large part due to these Maya nobles, who passed down their knowledge to their students. Because of this, “the dominance of the Maya nobility over the position of scribe was made perpetual because those Maya nobles who had learned to read and write were able to hand pick their own successors” (Chuchiak 2010, 95).

Almost all the *escribanos* in the eastern part of the Yucatan had still used and preferred Maya forms of terminology, even though the Spanish equivalent was known amongst them. Chuchiak states that the

Eastern Maya escribanos were therefore responsible for the retained knowledge of their Maya hieroglyphic writing system. He argues that the, “traditional elite in the east not only dominated alphabetic writing, but there are also clues that they may have preserved the hieroglyphic script longer than in the western peninsula, where the elite were under close watch” (Chuchiak 2010, 104). These elite Maya families were the May, Cen, Noh, Dzul, Huchim, and Camel (Chuchiak 2010, 99). The specific location of these elite families, especially the latter three, around the eastern area of the Yucatan were crucial in the resistance because of the lack of Spanish control and colonial influence. These families retained sacred knowledge of their culture and were able to continue their noble scribal class while resisting and manipulating the Spanish.

The unique approach that Maya *escribanos* used against the Spanish not only preserved Maya culture, but also maintained their own existence. The region of the Yucatan peninsula holds many accounts of how the Maya were able to use linguistic and cultural virtuosity as a form of survival in a new colonial world. Chuchiak emphasizes that the Maya themselves are responsible for their own preservation of culture and has maintained a strong foothold in their history. Spanish influence over Mesoamerica enabled those with voices to speak, rewriting their history through their worldview.

Works Cited

Chuchiak, John F. 2010. “Writing as Resistance: Maya Graphic Pluralism and Indigenous Elite Strategies for Survival in Colonial Yucatan, 1550-1750.” *Ethnohistory* 57 (1): 87–116. <https://doi.org/10.1215/00141801-2009-055>.